

Support to Foster Parents Effects on
Stability in Foster Care Placements

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Abstract

The federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 has placed emphasis on the need for stability of foster children in out of home placements for social service agencies providing out of home care. This has led to the importance of determining the characteristics needed to support foster parents in providing stable placements for the children in their care. A significant correlation was not found in this study, between the face to face contacts social workers have with the child in placement and the stability of the child in placement. However, the lack of prior research focusing on the needs of the foster parents and the social worker role in providing stable placements for the children indicates a need for further exploration.

THE SUPPORT TO FOSTER PARENTS EFFECTS ON STABILITY OF FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS

Since the enactment of The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the follow up of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, an emphasis has been placed on permanency planning for children and greater placement stability. State and national outcomes are monitored through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2005), which includes the number of movements recorded for children in foster care. The indicator of placement instability in the national outcomes report is for the percentage of children who had no more than two placement settings once placement occurs.

The concern for placement stability is linked to the needs of children to develop attachments in order to reduce the incidents of developmental delays and behavioral problems. Research has established a link between foster children and a higher rate of developmental delays and behavioral problems (Gauthier, Fortin, & Jéliu, 2004; Barber and Delfabbro, 2001). The concerns surrounding the needs of children and the attachment issues that result when a child is in placement in foster care, are a primary result of the need for permanency and a reduction of placement instability during the foster care placement. It appears reasonable to assume the longer a child is in foster care, the higher the opportunities for placement instability becomes. The need for permanency planning is based on the well being of children and their rights to a stable permanent home. However, not all research indicates placement instability as being damaging. Barber and Delfabbro (2003) found that disruptions up to the eighth month of placement may not be damaging to the child. The study found an association between placement

stability and psychosocial well being but also found that even when placement instability was found, improvements in the child's development continued to show some improvements (Barber and Delfabbro, 2003). The study focused on specific demographics, reasons for placement, and mental health variables of the children. The mental health variables were broken down into four specific areas. They stressed the findings of their research pointed to the need for social workers to be aware that fear of the effects of disruption should not be the sole factor in determining the well being of the child (Barber and Delfabbro, 2003). Limitations included a small sample size which limits generalization to the overall foster care population and the definitions for mental health diagnosis used in this study are different from other studies which places a restriction on comparing the findings directly to other studies. The study did provide questions as to whether placement stability issues should outweigh the desire to find the optimal placement for the child.

The effects of disruptions on children and the variables involved in the disruptions were two of the major areas of research. Variables, including the characteristics of the child or caretaker involved, pointed out a wide range of issues and possible target areas for the child welfare/social work profession to assess in order to reduce the disruption levels of children in the foster care system. Research indicates that it is two times more likely for a disruption to occur in the first six months of placement (Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, and Whaley, 2001). In this research, Smith et al. (2001) found a link between the age and gender of the child as a factor of disruption, with the data pointing to a higher rate of older females involved in disruptions. There is also evidence that

children who are removed at a very young age experience higher rates of placement instability (Cooper, Peterson, and Meier, 1987).

Smith et al. (2001) also pointed out the various definitions used by researchers when the study of placement disruptions occurs. Smith et al. (2001) stated:

“Definitions for placement disruptions can include all or only one of the following factors: reasons relating to the foster parents’ change in family circumstances, the child’s problem behavior the agency’s policy to place siblings together or differing terms meaning one of these factors. The definition used and the limitations that definition places on the research requires the reader to be cautious in comparing the various findings of research” (p. 205).

Smith et al. (2001) used any move required despite reasons, as a placement disruption, which will also be the definition utilized in this research. In this study Smith et al. utilized a small sample size of 90 children who were in a specific foster care program aimed at dealing with the needs of the children in the least intrusive environment. This study focused on the variables of age and gender of the children as well as the mental health status (Axis I diagnosis) of the children for comparison analysis.

Very few studies were found that related to the relationship between visits and supports provided to the foster parents and the stability of the placement. One study found specific to the disruptions in foster homes was completed by Stone and Stone (1983). The study utilized the definition of disruption as a removal from the foster home within the first one and a half years from placement, when the removal was not a result of parental compliance issues. A small sample of sixty-four children was utilized for this study. The dependent variable for this investigative study was the outcome of the foster

placement as labeled either a success or failure, which the researchers specifically defined. The independent variables included characteristics of the agency, the natural parents, the foster child, and the foster parents. Again the researchers were specific in labeling the characteristics included in the study. An analysis of the data presented the degree of contact, rapport building, and energy expended by the caseworker as the most strongly associated with placement success (Stone and Stone, 1987). Stone and Stone (1987) also suggested the absence of a relationship between other variables tested in the study to the relationship of the worker and the foster parent indicated a need for the social worker to be available to the foster parent and provide assistance to them as vital to stability of placements. Limitations of the study indicated a need for further validation of the findings but presented the need for emphasis to be placed on the support given to foster parents if placement instability is to be reduced.

Research indicates the importance of foster care placement stability and permanency to the well being of the child. Administrators of programs involving the foster care placements of children must also be concerned with the monies attached by the federal government to the outcomes set for placement stability. It has become evident that numerous studies have been completed regarding a wide range of factors involved in the stability of a placement. Research is limited in regards to a relationship between the visits being completed in the foster home by the social worker to the stability of the placements. It would appear that continued research is needed to determine the emphasis needed by social workers on the support and rapport established with the foster parents as a means to decrease the incidents of disruption in these homes.

The stability of placements for children in the foster care system continues to be an issue of concern for the agencies faced with the goal of providing stability to foster children. The purpose of this study was to determine if children with the greater percent of face to face visits in placement have a greater percentage of two or less placements in foster care. It is hypothesized the greater the percent of face to face visits with children in resource placements reduces the number of placements. A comparison will be made between the dependent variable which is the percentage of children with two or less placements in foster care with the independent variable of the percentage of children with face to face visits in their placement.

Method

This study was undertaken to determine if social workers' monthly contact with foster children in the placement affected the number of placements the child experienced. It was believed that knowing the results might lead to identifying the significance of social worker support to foster parents for the stability of placements.

The sample for the study included the children placed in a foster care placement in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, who have been in a placement for at least two months. Kentucky defines the placement of a child in a foster care placement as a child who is committed to the state and in an adoptive home, a foster home, group home, hospital, independent living placement, private child care facility, treatment facility or a relative home.

This study involved the use of secondary data obtained from the Cabinet for Health and Family Services (CHFS), Division of Protection and Permanency. CHFS maintains an automated window based program titled TWIST to support social workers case

management practices. This data provides the agency with numerous management reports that are used in the day to day management of case work and evaluation of program outcomes. The data utilized for this study was taken from the monthly management report of TWS-058SW for the months of January 2004 through December 2004. The management reports are distributed on the security protected system which is accessible through employee code access.

The columns utilized on the management report labeled 'the number of kids with current contact in resource homes' and 'the number of kids in OOHC in PCC places with current contact in resource' were the independent variables. 'The number of kids with two or less placements' was the dependent variable.

The monthly reports were obtained from the Commonwealth Office of Technology with the assistance of the regional Procedure Development Coordinator. The column totals for all children in placement representing the 'number of kids with current contact in resource homes' and 'the number of kids in OOHC in PCC places with current contact in resource' were added together to indicate the total number of all children in placements with current contacts for each month in the year 2004. These totals along with the column amounts for each month representing 'the number of kids with two or less placements' were entered into a code book utilizing the Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. A Pearson correlation analysis, two-tailed with a significant correlation at the 0.01 level, was completed to determine if a relationship existed between the two variables. Frequency and descriptive analysis were also completed utilizing the SPSS program.

Results and Findings

During the year 2004, there were a maximum of 6848 children placed in foster care in the State of Kentucky. The minimum number of face to face contacts with children in placement during this time period was 3693 with a maximum number of visits occurring with 4305 of the children in care. The minimum number of children with two or less placements during this time frame was 3627, with the maximum reaching 4305 (see table 1).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>
Face to face contact with child in placement	3693	4305
2 or less placements	3627	4257
Total number of children in Out of home care	6066	6848

The Pearson correlation conducted between the face to face visits and children with two or less placements was a .381 correlation which indicated a lack of a significant correlation between the two variables (see table 2).

Table 2

Correlations

		Face to face contact with <u>placement</u>	2 or less <u>placements</u>
Face to face contact with placement	Pearson Correlation	1	.381
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.222
	N	12	12
2 or less placements	Pearson Correlation	.381	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.222	
	N	12	12

Discussion

Study findings indicate no significant correlation resulted from the Pearson correlation conducted between the face to face visits and children with two or less placements. The number of face to face visits in placement does not appear to be related to the number of placements children experience. The findings further indicate over half of the children, at a minimum, are visited in their placements during a month and that over half have two or less placements. This data does not reflect whether the specific children who are seen on a monthly basis are the same children who have two or less placements. Nor does the documenting of a contact with the child in out of home placement provide specific details as to what type of supports are being provided to the foster parents to enable them to deal

with the children placed in their home or facility. In order to provide greater insight into the needs of the foster parents it appears that a more specific determination of the variables would be needed.

There are several limitations to this study. This study utilized secondary data which is collected by the Cabinet for management purposes of determining whether or not contacts are made by the social worker with the children in out of home care. The data in the management report is not collected to reflect how the visits affect the foster parent's ability to provide for the children in their homes nor the quality of the visits. By using secondary data there is no opportunity to clarify the data or the quality of the visits that are reflected in the data. The collection of the data can not be properly verified, as it is collected by agency personnel. The ethical issues of collections and inputting of data can not be examined using secondary data. The definition of a home visit utilized by the state is a private, face-to-face contact with children in out of home care. Although the role of the social worker includes providing support to the foster parents and assisting them in improving their skills, it is not part of the definition used to dictate inputting a contact into the system. As a result the data utilized was not representative of the variables as defined in the study. Another limitation of the study was the data used does not differentiate between the children who have two or less placements and those with face to face contact between the foster children, foster parents, and social worker. It is uncertain from the data whether the children with both variables are the same or different. The statistics also do not consider the type of movement that occurs, from foster home to hospital back to initial foster home.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although a correlation was not found in this study the literature review does indicate the needs of the children and foster parents as major factors in the stability of the child in a placement. The ability to define the variables that affect a foster care placement is important to the stability of children, with the literature indicating most of the previous research has focused on the child's needs. The Adoption and Safe Families Act has placed great emphasis on the placement stability of children in foster care, yet the literature review indicates little research has been completed on the needs of the foster parents. This indicates the need for further research to determine what variables relating to foster parents have significance on the stability of children in their placements. In order for social service agencies to be able to ensure higher rates of stability research must focus on the needs of the foster parents to assist social workers in building the skills they require to support the foster parents.

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